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Nassim Benchaabane

ST. LOUIS — A chess star claims in a lawsuit that the U.S. Chess Federation tried to ruin her reputation after she went public with allegations about a former St. Louis coach sexually assaulting her and others.

The lawsuit by Jennifer Shahade, a two-time U.S. women's champion, author and mentor for young women in chess, alleges that the St. Louis-based chess federation organized a smear campaign against her after she tried to get the organization to investigate Alejandro Ramirez.

The **accusations against Ramirez**, a former St. Louis University coach and employee of the St. Louis Chess Club, sparked widespread criticism of the club, which helped make St. Louis the nation's de facto capitol of chess. U.S. Chess, the top governing entity for the game, was also criticized for ignoring or failing to address gender discrimination and sexual misconduct.

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"As a victim and whistleblower, I am fighting back against campaigns to silence me and retaliate against me for speaking up about sexual violence in chess," Shahade said in a statement Wednesday. "It's been my lifelong mission for women and girls to thrive in this game. I have fought many battles on the chess board and the poker table but this fight for a better chess world is the most important one."

U.S. Chess spokesman Daniel Lucas said the organization denied the claims in the lawsuit but declined further comment.

"We will defend ourselves vigorously," Lucas said in a statement.

Shahade, a former program director of U.S. Chess, said in social media posts in February 2023 that Ramirez had sexually assaulted her twice over the past decade, including one incident at a small gathering in a St. Louis home. Other women later **came forward with similar allegations** against Ramirez, including some who said they were underage students at the time.

Ramirez was the St. Louis Chess Club's highest-paid employee and had served as St. Louis University's chess coach since 2016. He denied the allegations but later **resigned from his jobs**. He was also a member of U.S. Chess and had been the U.S. women's coach in 2022, in addition to serving as a commentator and youth coach.

St. Louis Chess Club and U.S. Chess both banned Ramirez after completing confidential investigations and announced policy revisions meant to prevent inappropriate conduct.

U.S. Chess admitted receiving complaints about Ramirez in 2020 and said it stopped "engaging Ramirez in any capacity where he would come into contact with minors." But the federation said it did not immediately launch an investigation because it did not receive direct allegations against him until 2022, when Shahade wrote a complaint.

Shahade resigned from U.S. Chess in September 2023 after four years directing the

women's program, citing concerns about how the organization responded to her claims.

Her lawsuit, filed Tuesday in Monmouth County in New Jersey, cites Ramirez's appearance at several chess events where youth players were present, along with U.S. Chess officials, after the organization said it had stopped engaging him. Ramirez was not investigated by U.S. Chess or the St. Louis Club until Shahade went public with her allegations, the lawsuit says.

U.S. Chess officials ignored other concerns Shahade brought forward, including sexual comments about her by a former board member, an allegation a U.S. Chess member was stalking her and other female players, and death and rape threats she received after going public with allegations against Ramirez, the lawsuit says.

The lawsuit also cites statements by U.S. Chess officials, saying the comments show they ignored, minimized or discredited concerns of discrimination and sexual harassment. The suit, for example, cites a public Facebook exchange in which U.S. Chess President Randy Bauer blamed Shahade for not coming forward sooner. Bauer also threatened to release identifying information about another alleged victim of misconduct, which prompted the victim to decline to respond when U.S. Chess launched an investigation.

Among other allegations in the lawsuit:

- After she went public, U.S. Chess officials tried to discredit Shahade in social media statements. Also, lawyers for the organization sent her multiple demands to stop speaking out, including a cease-and-desist letter demanding she refrain from any contact with youth players.
- U.S. Chess officials tried to "rush" Shahade into a "sham mediation" and get her to sign a non-disparaging agreement and a non-disclosure agreement "in order to silence her." After Shahade obtained her own lawyer, U.S. Chess declined to continue mediation talks.

- In New Jersey, a U.S. Chess board member spread lies about Shahade at an event, including that she was physically and mentally ill and "therefore not credible."
- U.S. Chess officials "conspired" with the New Jersey Chess Federation's president, Pete Tamburro, and a senior editor at American Chess Magazine to publish a February 2024 article "intentionally" riddled with errors that "minimized and mocked her assault" and bolstered the federation's claim that it had responded appropriately to the allegations. A public statement U.S. Chess issued praising the article "recklessly jeopardized potential criminal and civil investigations against Ramirez." Tamburro, who is named as a defendant in the lawsuit, did not respond to requests for comment from the Post-Dispatch.

In addition to claims of discrimination, retaliation and libel, the lawsuit alleges U.S. Chess, a nonprofit, violated New Jersey racketeering laws by protecting "predators of children, women and the vulnerable" against its stated fundraising aims to promote the game.

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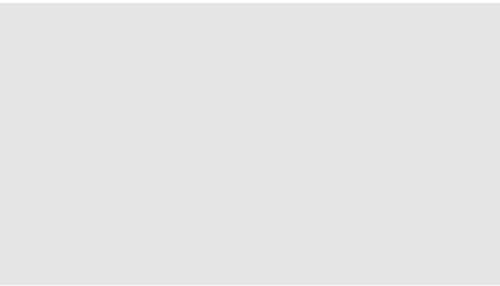
By Nassim Benchaabane

St. Louis County reporter

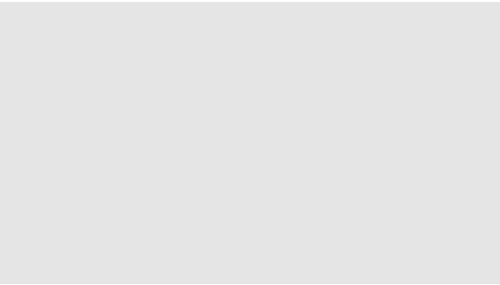


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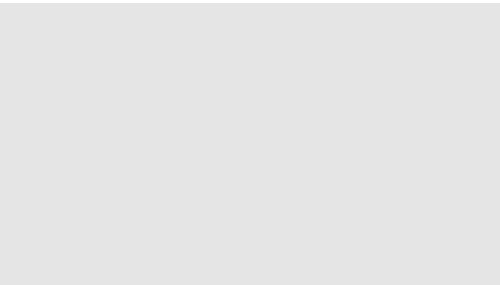


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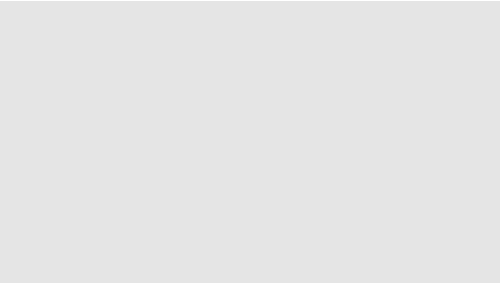
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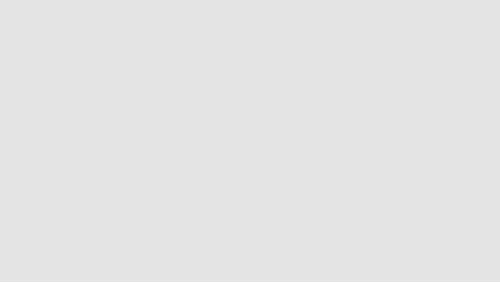
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